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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: IRI POLL SHOWS THE ECONOMY IS PRIMARY
CONCERN, BUT TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY STILL IMPORTANT

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The much anticipated poll from the USAID funded International Republican Institute (IRI) presented to the Ambassador on March 18, showed polling numbers for President Saakashvili and the United National Movement (UNM) have dropped somewhat from their post-war high in September 2008, but remain far higher than any other opposition leader. Polling data shows the Georgian public is rethinking who is to blame for the August war although it still blames Russia, and fewer than 50 percent of the public believe that demonstrations are an acceptable form of social protest. Other than Giorgi Targamadze (Christian Democratic Movement "CDM") whose numbers remain strong, neither parliamentary opposition leaders nor non-parliamentary opposition leaders seem to be making much headway. Widely perceived among Georgia's political elites as potential challengers to President Saakashvili, former Georgian Ambassador to the UN Irakli Alasania (Alliance for Georgia "Alliance") and Nino Burjanadze's (Democratic Movement - United Georgia) polling numbers indicate that neither has gained significant resonance. Economic well-being is the dominant issue for Georgians, but Georgia's territorial integrity remains the other major issue on the country's mind. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: While President Saakashvili and the UNM are not universally popular, they still retain broad public support especially when compared with their challengers. Economic uncertainty dominates the concerns of everyday Georgians, as it does with many throughout the world because of the world economic crisis, and has negatively affected President Saakashvili's rating; however, polls indicate Saakashvili and the UNM would be the decided favorite to win new elections if they were held today. The Lithuanian lead pollster for the project noted that Saakashvili and his Government actually enjoy higher approval ratings than other governments also facing the economic crisis. Post's January assessment (ref A) still holds; Saakashvili and the UNM remain potentially vulnerable on the economy if an opposition political figure can present a compelling alternative or the situation gets dramatically worse. However, as in January, no non-parliamentary opposition figure has yet provided a coherent alternative political vision in general, much less on economic policy. By focusing solely on new elections and recriminations of President Saakashvili, the non-parliamentary opposition message appears to ignore the major concerns of the majority of average Georgians. End Comment.

Poll Result - Saakashvili and UNM Drop

[1](#)3. (C) President Saakashvili's favorability rating (54 positive, 38 negative vs. 75 positive, 21 negative in IRI's September 2008 poll) has dropped after losing his post war bounce and as a result of the global economic crisis, which according to the pollster has negatively affected all leaders across the region. Nonetheless, his positive rating means in

spite of the war and crisis, he remains a relatively popular figure. The only political figures who garner higher favorable ratings than the president are: Ombudsman Sozar Subari (67 percent), Christian Democrat parliamentary leader Giorgi Targamadze (67 percent) businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili (62 percent) and Refugee Minister Koba Subeliani (60 percent). If presidential elections were held tomorrow, Saakashvili would receive 34 percent of the vote, Targamadze 11 percent, Alasania (8), former Defense Minister Okruashvili (6), Labor Party leader Natelashvili (6), Burjanadze (4), New Rights leader Gamkrelidze (2), former presidential candidate Gachechiladze (2), none (10), and don't know "DK" (16). While down from September 2008 when he received 51 percent support in hypothetical presidential elections, only Targamadze (8 in 2008) and Alasania (not polled) have made up any ground; in fact, the pollster noted that Saakashvili's lost numbers have been more-or-less evenly distributed among his rivals, ensuring that no individual politician gained much ground. When the President is evaluated on his performance during the financial crisis, 43 percent ranked his performance as very or somewhat positive against 46 percent who ranked it as negative or somewhat negative. Moreover, Saakashvili out-polls his presidential election numbers when voters are asked who is best to fix unemployment (37 percent). The numbers do not indicate widespread public dissatisfaction with the president's handling of the economy. (Embassy Comment: The IRI pollster suggested that remittances have significantly decreased. The decreased cash flow from abroad has been one, if not the most acute, source of financial distress among the most vulnerable populations. This phenomena may help explain why Saakashvili is not shouldering a major portion of the blame for the

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economic slowdown as many Georgians view their current economic hardship as driven by forces outside Georgia rather than by UNM policies. End Comment.).

14. (C) Likewise, UNM would stand poised to win pre-term parliamentary elections gaining 31 percent support as a first choice and 4 percent as a second. (Other results in descending order respectively showing first choice, second choice numbers. CDM 13,10 - Labor (Natelashvili) 7,5 - New Rights/Republicans (Gamkrelidze/Usupashvili) 6,5 - Political Team of Alasania (Alasania polled separately from New Rights/Republicans at his request) 5,6 - Democratic Movement United Georgia (Nino Burjanadze) 3,4 - none 12,16 and no answer 15,30). Compared with September 2008, UNM's ratings have dropped from 52 and 4, although no single opposition member has directly benefited from the drop in support. Nonetheless, the UNM remains the most trusted party to successfully solve Georgia's problems with 22 percent mentioning them first as they ranked their preferences and 23 percent subsequently. (CDM - 8 first, 12 subsequent, Labor - 4,5, Alasania - 2,5, none 22 and DK 35). In spite of some slippage, UNM remains the dominant party and perhaps more importantly, none of the non-parliamentary opposition calling for new elections have made significant gains since September 2008.

Non-Parliamentary Opposition - Still Spinning Their Wheels

15. (C) As noted above, the IRI poll shows that no non-parliamentary opposition figure is widely considered to be a potential replacement for President Saakashvili. Among the non-parliamentary opposition, Irakli Okruashvili has the highest favorability rating (50 percent positive, 34 percent negative, 5 have not heard the name, 10 DK); followed by David Gamkrelidze (48,38,6,8); David Usupashvili (46,35,8,11); Irakli Alasania (45,30,8,17); Levan Gachechiladze (39,45,7,13); Shalva Natelashvili (37,50,5,7); and Nino Burjanadze (36,55,2,9). All the major non-parliamentary players have seen their favorability ratings drop since September 2008. Alasania, Gamkrelidze, and Usupashvili all have net positive ratings which indicates

their Alliance is the best situated of the non-parliamentary groups on this indicator though it may be too soon to draw any major conclusion about Alasania's number since he has only recently entered the political arena. Nino Burjanadze's 36 percent favorable rating (with a 55 percent unfavorable rating) is down from 63 percent favorable (33 percent unfavorable rating) in September of 2008, indicating her radical turn has not been well received. (Embassy Comment: In general, the non-parliamentary opposition can muster a significant amount of support in the aggregate. However, the support is thinly spread among a number of rival groups. Until and unless the non-parliamentary opposition can coalesce around one group or leader, post believes that their support amounts to much less than the sum of its parts. End Comment.).

Christian Democrats - Still Chugging Along

16. (C) As noted, Giorgi Targamadze has the highest favorability rating among any politician, another signal that his moderate opposition message resonated broadly with the public. CDM MP, Magda Anikashvili (50,26,12,12) is the fourth most popular party politician in Georgia behind Targamadze and Saakashvili. Often criticized as a UNM puppet party by other radical opposition members, the CDM is second only to Labor when asked which parties do the Georgian public consider in opposition (Labor - 24 first mentioned, 30 all mentioned; CDM - 16,21; New Rights - 7,12; Alasania 5,7). Targamadze would finish second (to Saakashvili, who is term-limited and can not run again) in a presidential election if held today and the CDM would be the second largest vote-winner in a parliamentary election. Targamadze is also listed second as the person perceived most able to fix unemployment (9 percent) and territorial integrity (8 percent - tied with Alasania). Despite CDM's short history, it appears to be gaining the confidence of Georgia's electorate.

Economy is the Issue - Mood is Negative - Territorial Integrity Still Rates High

17. (C) Currently only 27 percent of Georgians think the country is moving in the right direction versus 59 percent who think things are moving in the wrong direction (47 right, 42 wrong in September 2008 poll). The main reason for the negative swing is the economy, which 71 percent of Georgians say has gotten worse in the last 3 months. Georgians overwhelmingly say (62 percent) that their economic situation has worsened in this time frame, with 33 percent saying it has stayed the same. Respondents indicate that unemployment is the most important issue Georgia is facing (27 percent

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first mention, 52 percent all mentions), followed by territorial integrity (19,35); the economic situation (17,37); threat of war (9,15); and Georgian - Russian relations (7,12). The polling shows a shift from September 2008 when territorial integrity; threat of war; unemployment; Georgian - Russian relations; and the economic situation were the top five concerns in that order. Nevertheless, when asked what should be the GOG's main priority, restoring territorial integrity is the first choice (59 percent - 28 percent second) with creating jobs second (29 percent - 53 percent second). (Embassy Comment: The overall polling data corresponds to Post's anecdotal sense that public opinion has become more and more focused on economic issues rather than foreign policy, with domestic democratic concerns low on the average Georgian's priority list. However, when asked directly to name Georgia's most pressing concern, and provided with a list of potential issues, territorial integrity is still the most mentioned. End Note.).

Who Wants Protests - It Appears Not Many

18. (C) The respondents showed a general ambivalence towards

protests. Only 48 percent believe that demonstrations are an acceptable form of protest with 40 percent who do not. This represents a drop from the September 2008 poll (52 for - 42 against). A majority of Georgians (52 percent vs 34 percent) support the collection of signatures for a petition or a letter as an acceptable form of social protests. In response to the question, "(d)o you accept the possibility of internal political confrontation in the current situation or does everything need to be done to keep internal political stability?"; 86 percent said politicians need to do everything to keep internal political stability with 8 percent who would accept political confrontation. The data seems to suggest that non-parliamentary calls for protests do not enjoy widespread public support other than among the supporters they already have.

The War - USA - NATO - Charter Support

19. (C) The poll suggests that the Georgian public may be beginning to rethink the August conflict (14 percent say Georgia started the war, 63 percent say Georgia reacted to Russian aggression, 23 percent DK/NA versus 7, 84, and 9 in September 2008.) (Embassy Note: Saakashvili is still viewed by 33 percent as the person who can best lead Georgia against Russian aggression; Alasania received 10 percent; Targamadze received 8; Okruashvili and Natelashvili received 5, Burjanadze received 4 with 30 percent saying none or don't know. End Note). Currently, 89 percent of Georgians evaluate relations with the U.S. as good but only 52 percent call the U.S. a reliable friend (97 percent said relations were good, and 70 called U.S. a reliable friend in the September 2008 poll). Additionally, support for entry into NATO has dropped from 87 percent for, 8 percent against in September 2008 to 72 for, and 17 against in the current poll. As the August conflict grows more distant, Georgian opinions vis-a-vis the U.S. and NATO seem to be weakening somewhat (A February 2007 IRI poll had 94 percent evaluate relations as good and support for NATO was at 91 percent while the April 2006 IRI poll had the numbers at 93 percent and 74 percent respectively). Finally of the 40 percent who had heard of the U.S.- Georgia charter, 77 percent supported it while only 7 percent opposed.

TEFFT